
Group supervision for social work students on placement: An international comparison

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Summary: Partnership Care West is a voluntary organisation that contracts with the Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC) to provide ten placements for social work students. NISCC is a statutory organisation, with responsibility for registering and regulating social care/work, improving standards in education and training and standardising practice in Northern Ireland NISCC (2003).

The students attend the practice learning centre and are then given placements in voluntary sector sites established by the centre. Traditionally, the students were supervised on a one to one basis using the long arm approach. In recent years however, the centre has developed a model for supervising these students in groups.

Building on my positive experience of conducting group supervision and to further my knowledge, skills and values in this area, I recently undertook an international comparison with the School of Social Work in Haifa Israel. This School has an already well established model for supervising students in groups and I hoped that I could learn something to help me develop my model further. I would like to thank Nava Arkin at the University of Haifa for her willingness to take part in this comparison and for her encouragement throughout. This article aims to outline my findings of the comparison and outline the theoretical constructs that make international comparisons in social work possible.

Key words: international, group supervision

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Introduction

The following comparison aims to advance ideas about the nature of international social work and to provide theoretical and illustrative material as a basis for developing my own practice in group supervision for social work students whilst on practice placement. I will compare the model that I have developed within my own agency (Partnership Care West, Practice Learning Centre) with a model that has been developed at the University of Haifa in Israel. I will argue that even an activity apparently so intimately linked to the socio-economic characteristics and culture of a given nation, must recognise the impact of the international arena, through a process known as internationalisation. I will discuss the usefulness and difficulties of an international comparison in social work. I will outline my own model, placing it in the local context of Northern Ireland. I will then outline the Israeli experience, discussing the local issues that effect practice in that country. I shall then provide a theoretical structure for comparing internationally and outline the similarities and differences at the mezzo, macro and micro level.

Discussion

While leaders in this field have historically been aware of developments elsewhere and have often been active at international level, recent rapid internationalisation has impacted on social welfare as much as other aspects of daily life, and now requires all social workers to place their local activities in a wider frame Lyons (2000). Social work has traditionally been seen as a local culture bound activity, specific to a given time and place; clearly there is an essential relationship between much social work practice and the nature, needs and requirements of the society in which the activity takes place (Lorenz 1994 in Lyons 2000). However in the concluding decades of the twentieth century, even countries that had previously been regarded as isolated or independent have been subject to the pressures of internationalisation.

Before continuing, I feel it is important to define what I mean by international and internationalisation? The Collins dictionary defines international as 'of, concerning, or involving two or more nations or

nationalities'. Guzzetta (1990) defines internationalisation as 'neither exclusive importation of ideas nor exclusive exportation of ideas, but a clear understanding that the inter in international means reciprocal'.

Since the 1980s however, the term internationalisation has evolved and been replaced by the term globalisation. Dominelli and Hoogvelt (1996) argue that globalisation has three main features:

- The emergence of a global market principle.
- Flexible accumulation, and
- The internationalisation of the state.

A common feature of globalisation is a worldwide interconnectedness and interdependence that both characterises and is driving social change, Pinkerton (2002). Robertson (1992, p.8) calls this 'the compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole'. All this has been made possible by the development of the communication media, the information superhighway and travel, making contact between different cultures more frequent and some would argue, more beneficial.

Usefulness and difficulties in comparative study

Pursuing the idea that this sense of interconnectedness is beneficial, Watts (1995) emphasises that learning from other countries 'is mutual, on-going and dynamic and can help us to advance the human condition'. Additionally, an international perspective can contribute to the shared understandings necessary to respond effectively to social problems, including alleviating poverty and combating racism, cultural imperialism and violence. Shared learning may help to find solutions and responses to what have thus far proved to be intractable human problems. An international social work perspective will be critical in documenting and recording human and social suffering and consequently new ideas to help alleviate distress and disadvantage might be found Watts (1995).

Healy (1990) supports this view, adding that social workers have added increasingly to what we know about issues such as mental illness, poverty, ageing, crime, child welfare, health care, substance abuse and community development and that this knowledge could inform the

debate on these issues in the global market.

Furthermore, Healy (1990) argues that there are four main reasons for an understanding of globalisation vis-à-vis social work. Firstly, Healy argues that social work can provide an educated dynamic to resolving problems created by disadvantage and discrimination. Secondly, there is an increasing level of global interdependence and this has a direct impact on local social work practice. Thirdly, it is useful to have an international knowledge in order to practice locally. Finally, social work can take its place in the international arena alongside psychiatry, sociology and law etc., when it comes to resolving problems of a local nature.

In addition to this, Hokenstad (1992) suggests that social work has much to learn from the developing world's approach to tackling issues such as poverty and the increasingly despondent under class that western societies face. Hokenstad further argues that the responses to these problems need to be 'global in outlook and local in action', (1992, p.191). Hokenstad also claims that an international component in the social workers repertoire of skills helps social work liberate itself from cultural myopia.

Finally, having an international perspective might, in addition to the possibilities discussed above, be seen to reflect the very values inherent in social work practice - mutuality, respect and shared knowledge.

However, there are inherent dangers associated with globalisation. Firstly, there is a danger of ethnocentrism and racism. The danger lies in the fact that our analysis of others is based on our own worldview as opposed to looking at issues from the host culture. Secondly, using what we would define as our own normative framework implies superiority. This is especially so if globalisation is viewed as westernisation, and the export of capitalism. Thirdly, language, culture and social context can make shared understanding difficult. Finally, with globalisation, there is a danger of the reverse of more productive and helpful relationships emerging. The net result could end as polarisation, where we recognise one culture or group as totally different, or irrelevant Payne (1996).

Recognising these dangers and in an attempt to avoid them, Payne (1996) recommends that we develop what he terms a discursive formation strategy when it comes to exploring issues internationally. Payne advocates seeing the nature of social work as a collection of competing sets of ideas, presented as actions and concepts. The discourse about them forms social work. In this approach, we do not seek wholeness through one perspective. Instead, we value the discourse between

perspectives as constructing a whole while exploring and valuing difference.

Issue for comparison

The issue that I wish to address, through a global comparison with another country, is group supervision with students at qualifying level whilst they are on placement.

I became interested in this particular issue in June 2002. When my colleague and I reflected back over the previous year's students and the quality and effectiveness of our individual supervision with them, we discovered several main themes in our thinking that we felt related to individual supervision; (for a fuller account of reflection see (Schon, 1983).

Firstly, it was difficult to equalise the power imbalance that existed between the student and us. This power imbalance existed on several levels,

- Teacher/student
- Perceived expert / non-expert
- Male / female
- Assessor / assessed.

Secondly, the students learning experience was being restricted by the one to one approach. There was limited room for alternative perspectives that could have enhanced the student's knowledge.

Thirdly, the student would feel isolated and unsupported without peer contact. This could also lead to a block in learning and a feeling of being alone.

In addition to this, I also became interested in-group supervision due to the new challenges that practice teachers will face under the new degree in social work in Northern Ireland. From 2005, practice teaching will change dramatically. The role of the practice teacher looks likely to change and practice teachers/assessors will be required to provide practice teaching/learning in an innovative and effective way. NISCC are keen to develop new models for practice learning that are dynamic, progressive and that can meet the needs of students studying for the

new Bachelor of Social Work.

Taking cognisance of this, I set about developing a model of group supervision that would begin to meet the changing needs of students and meet the challenges of the new degree. My model, outlined below, was developed by exploring and applying the theories of group work, supervision, adult learning and anti-oppressive practice theory, which I have outlined elsewhere McCafferty (2004).

The model

The model consisted of seven group sessions and seven individual sessions. These sessions alternated each week, so one week the students came together in a group and the next week the students were seen individually. Each facilitator retained the overall assessment responsibility for a designated student but the co-facilitator was able to add their assessment based on observations during the group.

Before the group started, we as facilitators met to prepare for the forthcoming session, feeling that this stage was crucial to the success of the group Douglas (1970). We checked in with one another on a cognitive and emotional level, ensuring we were fully prepared for the forthcoming session. We also ensured that we had divided the tasks equally between ourselves, thus ensuring we were modeling good partnership relationships for the students.

The group sessions themselves had a set agenda for each week and examined particular social work topics; these included contracting, evaluating process records, the theory and practice of social work, values in social work, self assessment and evaluation of skills, the importance of reflection in social work and portfolio construction.

The content of each session was purposely generic as each of the students was placed in different placement sites, with a different service-user group. Clearly, the content of the sessions does not have to stay the same and can be changed with the mutual consent of the facilitators and students. The point is however, that there was a main theme each week.

The group sessions all worked to a set format which meant that each week we began with an ice-breaker, which the students choose. This worked to get the members loosened up and created a relaxed and

supportive environment. We then had a check-in, during which time individuals were given the space to discuss with the group, the interventions that they experienced with service users that week. Hillerbrand (1989) found that intervention skills are enhanced by the verbalization of the cognitive processes of students in peer groups. Conceptualization is more effective within peer groups than under the guidance of an instructor (Arkin, 1999).

We then took a break and the facilitators left the students by themselves. This was important as it gave the students a period of time together without being assessed and lead to a greater sense of solidarity and cohesion. When the group finished at the end of placement, the students themselves commented that this was one of the most valuable parts of being in a group.

We then spent time on the main topic for that week and explored this issue in depth. This process of exploration was completed by using role plays, presentations, group exercises, vignettes, group discussions and homework exercises.

At the end of each session, we set the students some work to do for the next session, which could also be used as evidence in their portfolios. All sessions lasted three hours. The entire process of group supervision was assessed and the students were made aware of this at the beginning of placement when they signed the supervision contract. When the group sessions finished, the facilitators met to debrief. We used a simple format to give some structure to this process and each week we looked at our thoughts regarding how well the session went, the actual facts of what took place and how the content could be improved and what we were experiencing on an emotional level, as a means of evaluation.

Context of the issue

This model of supervising students in groups, which has been developed at the local level, is of course set in the wider global and national arena. It is therefore important to consider these issues first, if one is to develop a sense of context. This too, provides the basis for comparison with the chosen international country.

It would be impossible to fully understand how my project functions in Northern Ireland without first considering the nature of the state in a

society once described as the most violent in Western Europe, Campbell and McColgan (2002). Political and constitutional arrangements in Northern Ireland have always marked it out as a place apart within the United Kingdom. The Government of Ireland Act 1920 partitioned Ireland and left the northeastern counties a contested geopolitical space between catholic/nationalists and protestant/unionists. This resulted in a long and well-documented period of violence commonly known as the troubles.

Despite the complexity of the social structures put in place after this period, constitutional arrangements between Northern Ireland, the rest of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland tend to be preoccupied with problems raised by the national question. In 1972 full legislative powers were removed from Stormont, which was the local parliament, and placed in the hands of Westminster in London. Described as Direct Rule this mechanism has meant that Northern Ireland was administered through a newly created Northern Ireland Office, headed by the Secretary of State and a small number of ministers.

Some attempts have been made to progress these arrangements, culminating in the creation of a devolved Assembly through the Belfast Agreement in 1998, which was preceded by a somewhat successful peace process, Campbell and McColgan (2002). This agreement has to a greater or lesser extent, addressed a range of issues, suggesting openness to progressive reform and an emerging culture of human rights.

Unfortunately, at the time of writing, the Assembly is currently suspended and Direct Rule re-imposed. However, before the Assembly was suspended, it did make some major contributions to the way in which Northern Ireland manages its own affairs

One major contribution with relevance to social work was the creation of NISCC. Previously, the Central Council for the Education and Training of Social Work (CCETSW) was responsible for ensuring the standardisation of social work education. However, with the creation of the devolved Assembly with the power to make decisions effecting health and social welfare, NISCC was created to take over the role of CCETSW.

NISCC is a statutory body established by the Health and Personal Social Services Act (Northern Ireland) 2001. The aims of NISCC are to provide protection to those who use services, promote high standards of conduct and practice among social care/workers, strengthen and support the professionalism of the workforce and promote confidence in the sector NISCC (2003).

Relevant to this discussion, is the fact that NISCC has been provided by government departments with funds for the improvement of social work education. One of the areas for which these funds are available is to increase the number and improve the quality of practice placements. More specifically, NISCC contract directly with the Practice Learning Centre here at Partnership Care West to provide practice placements and contribute to the development of practice learning.

It is interesting to note in the context of my discussion about the effects of globalisation on local issues, that the very concept of a contract and contracting in social welfare appears to have been influenced at global level, not at local or national level as it would seem.

The globalisation of the economy has had an enormous impact on the British welfare state. Like other parts of the national economy, the welfare state has had to respond to the pressures for greater international competitiveness. It has done so by becoming a site that could provide capital for accumulation purposes and restructuring to allow the private commercial sector a greater role in welfare provision. Thus, globalisation has affected the structural framework and organisational culture of social work.

One consequence of these changes is that British statutory social work has become more fully integrated into the market economy. Statutory Social Services now contract work out and have had to cede their role as service providers to the voluntary and commercial sectors and become primarily purchasers of care. This shift has drawn both the statutory and voluntary sector into the business world via the medium of contracts Dominelli and Hoogvelt (1996).

The emergence of a global market principle involves the imposition of a new categorical imperative, namely global market efficiency, upon the domestic supply of goods and services. This sets the parameters for the privatisation of the welfare state and creates the conditions for a new relationship to be established between state and providers of welfare. This became known as contract government, which has been crucial in facilitating the welfare state's move from being a resource provider to a purchaser of services from provider units. The provider unit in this instance is Partnership Care West, whose actions are contractually defined and who are accountable for their behaviour.

Thus, one can see a direct link that the global emphasis on efficiency has on the welfare state at national level and the delivery of services at local level. In a drive for greater efficiency and innovation the state,

represented here by NISCC, has purchased the services of Partnership Care West's Practice Learning Centre and secured that relationship with a contract. This contract has in turn, been influenced by global market efficiency principles.

Relevant practice from the other country

This section outlines a similar project of group supervision in another country. The comparison is with group supervision of social work students in their second and third years in the Undergraduate Social Work Programme at the University Of Haifa School Of Social Work in Israel

In terms of context, Israel, like Northern Ireland, is a relatively new state. It was established mainly by European and Russian Jews who, having suffered persecution and exile from their own countries, finally had their dreams of establishing a political and geographical entity realised in 1948 when they established a home land in Israel Milton Edwards and Hinchliffe (2004). Over the next decades, Israel would overcome a variety of political and economic obstacles and survive several wars. The Jewish population would swell from about 500,000 in 1948 to over 5,243,000 in 2001, which was the result of natural growth and in-migration from many nations.

While Zionists asserted that all Jews share a common nationality, the practical challenge of uniting an incredibly diverse and often traumatised population in a new state was enormous Chomsky (2003). A consciously created culture, education, military experience and language were devoted to the task. Despite this, Israeli society continues to be stratified along the lines of ethnicity, class, religion and ideology Harris (1998). Further distinctions, having evolved within the particular social, political, religious and economic context of the Jewish state, continue to challenge national unity and consequently, the ideological basis of Israeli society Gold (2002).

With regards to social work, according to Israeli Social Work law 1996, if one wishes to practice as a social worker in Israel, it is necessary to first gain professional certification. One must then register in the social workers register (Pinkas Haovdim Hasotzialim) (Publications Department, English Section, Ministry of Immigrant Absorption).

To become a social worker, one must undertake a Bachelor of Social Work or Master of Social Work degree. All of Israel's major universities offer social work degrees at both the Bachelor and Masters level. The licensing and accrediting authority for these degrees is the Council for Higher Education, which is a statutory body, responsible for accrediting and authorising institutions of higher education to award degrees Hagshama (1998).

Regarding the University of Haifa programme, students graduate after three years of Social Work study, reaching the Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree, which serves as a licence to practice. The curriculum includes thirty-two hours of class work per semester and nineteen and a half hours of fieldwork per week during the second and third years. During this time all students in the programme undergo group supervision in addition to individual supervision. In the second year, group supervision is devoted to individual intervention and in the third year to group and/or community intervention. Group supervision addresses issues related to the particular method that the student is being asked to deal with in practice but it also involves using groups and group processes as a medium of teaching and learning Arkin et al (1999).

According to the overall model, the second and third year is divided into three phases in which three distinct supervision methods are applied. The three phases are to consist of:

1. The formative phase,
2. The working phase, and
3. The ending phase.

Within each phase there is a set content that the student must learn, as well as the use of different processes to enable the student to learn. Each phase also requires the supervisor to undertake different roles. For a fuller outline of this model see Arkin (1999).

Comparative analysis

It has been argued that a tentative framework for comparing social work in different countries can be developed using the notion of social domains Huston and Campbell (2001). This entails adopting the view that the interplay of distinct domains or spheres of activity can explain

social life. Domains can be thought of as a distinct layering of experience that determines action, Layder (1997). Although these are interlocking and mutually exclusive, no particular domain is the prime mover in terms of influence.

Three types of social domain are helpful in explaining and comparing social work practices globally. These are the macro, meso and the micro domains. The macro domain refers to large-scale international processes directly effecting nation states and indirectly effecting local social work practices within them. The meso domain can be viewed as the site where relationships between nation state, welfare regimes and social professionals are played out. The micro domain alludes to the specific activity of everyday social work practice, where academic discourses become transformed into practice wisdom, Huston and Campbell (2001). I have outlined the similarities and differences in each domain below.

Macro

Similarities

Both countries have at some point in their history been affected by the policies of Britain and America.

Britain maintained a presence in the Middle East up to 1948 and continues to have a presence in Northern Ireland.

The USA has had a political interest in both countries and has helped negotiate peace settlements in both countries i.e. the Good Friday Agreement in Northern Ireland and the Road Map for Peace in the middle east.

Both countries are relatively newly developed nation-states. Israel was founded in 1948 and Northern Ireland in 1921.

Both countries occupy contested geopolitical spaces.

Both countries exercise disproportionate power over world affairs compared with their geographical size and population.

Both countries experience high levels of violence.

Differences

Northern Ireland has managed to establish cease-fires from most of the groups who endorse violence to achieve political gain.

Another major world power, Russia was involved in the political life of the Middle East through its support of the Palestinians.

Northern Ireland is only beginning to be effected by the immigration of Central European peoples.

Meso

Similarities

Social work education is state sponsored, accredited and standardised

All social work education in Israel is university based. Northern Ireland is moving towards this system.

Social work practice is focused on the socioeconomically derived, physically and mentally disabled people, children, victims of political violence, and older people

Differences

Northern Ireland is only just moving to the BSW. Northern Ireland is doing away with the Masters programme.

Israel has a more culturally diverse population.

Northern Ireland is only recently beginning to have members of ethnic minorities move here.

Social work education in Northern Ireland is undergoing dramatic change.

Micro

Similarities

Fieldwork experience is seen as a vital component in social work education.

All students are supervised whilst on placement.

Group supervision is available to students.

Differences

Supervisors in Israel are University linked and accredited by the University.

Supervisors in Northern Ireland are known as Practice Teachers and are agency based.

All students in Israel undergo Group Supervision as well as individual supervision.

Students in Northern Ireland only get Group Supervision if the practice teacher chooses to work in this way.

The model in Haifa endorses weekly group supervision as well as individual supervision.

The model in my project has group supervision one week and individual supervision the following week.

The model in Haifa has three distinct phases (1) the formative phase (2) the working phase (3) the ending phase.

The model in my project sees each session as a separate entity unrelated to the next session.

The Haifa model places an emphasis on personal growth and development through an experiential process.

The model in my project places an emphasis on learning skills, acquiring knowledge and identifying values.

The model in Haifa has a pass or fail attached to the group supervision process.

My project sees the group as one part in the assessment process and does not have a pass or fail to the group section.

Implications

It is evident that the Haifa model of group supervision is more established and refined than my own. There is a long history of group supervision in Haifa, which has been tried and tested over a long period of time. Finding this model through a global comparison has been of excellent benefit to me and I intend to transform my own model in several areas.

To begin with, I intend to view the sessions as a continuum, with the formative, working and ending phases as outlined in the Haifa model, and not as single entities with a separate focus. Traditionally, each of my sessions began with a check-in about individual placement issues. Despite the fact that this did provide some useful insight into social work issues, I have recently begun to view this section as a placement management section, which could be completed at a different time. Discussions often focused on the practicalities of the placement or placement specific issues and the other members appeared excluded.

Additionally, the group did not have a sense of beginning, middle or end or experience the different feelings associated with each of these stages. This would have been useful because having experienced these feelings, the students could have tuned-in more effectively to the feelings their service-users may have at each stage of the professional relationship. In turn the students would have a better skill, knowledge and value base with which to practice empathetically.

I also feel our roles as facilitators need to develop. Historically, I think we have been overly concerned with the intellectual development of the students as opposed to their emotional or personal development. Looking at the Haifa model, the reader can see that the supervisor's role is to enhance the emotional world of the student and provide a model for good practice, as well as ensuring they have the necessary knowledge, skills and values to practice.

Additionally, I need to consider whether or not to make it explicit to the students that the group is assessed. At present it is stated at the learning agreement that supervision is one means of assessment but this seems to get lost somewhere in the process. For example, some students are very quiet in the group and add little to exercises, discussions and role-plays. Until now, I have tended to let this pass, arguing that we have other methods of completing a more holistic assessment. However, if an aspect of social work is about communicating and engaging, surely students need to be able to do this in a variety of settings, including groups and that their ability to do this needs to be assessed.

Finally, I feel that with the new BSW being introduced in Northern Ireland with an 85 day placement in the second year and a 100 day placement in the third year that our model will lend itself more easily to developing the experiential type of group endorsed by the Haifa model. At present there is enormous pressure with placements being so short and an almost manic emphasis on the portfolio, leaving very little room for a more experiential group. With longer placements, more time can be spent on personal growth and developing a professional identity. I therefore intend to do more sessions.

Conclusion

This has been an exceptionally rewarding comparison to do. For the past few years I have been supervising students in groups. I always felt this was an excellent way to supervise students and that they gained a lot from the experience. Recently however, I have wanted to develop this model by looking at how other professionals have approached the issue. I therefore decided to undertake a global comparison and I feel that this has been of great benefit to me.

As a result of the global comparison, I have been able to formulate new ideas, gain greater insight into other models and at the same time, learn something new about our fellow social work colleagues in another country. Additionally I feel our model has become more organic and dynamic. My comparison has also increased my confidence in the professional rigour of my model and given me the assurance to present this model as an alternative to the more traditional one to one supervision approach usually favoured in the British Isles.

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